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allegiances

thunderclan-

leader: halfstar- huge black tom with thick fur, a scarred body, and a split face, half black, half white

deputy: maplecreek- dark tortoiseshell she-cat with white mitts

warriors (toms)

nightthorn- black tom with seeping green eyes

spiderfang- dark gray tabby tom with cold brown eyes

thistlefoot- light gray tom with golden eyes and a white chest

sunshade- black tom with bright lemon yellow eyes

badgerclaws- black and white striped tom with unusually long claws

blackdust- light gray tom flecked with black along his shoulders and back

warriors (she-cats)

vipermask- pale gray-brown she-cat with a dark brown mask on her face, pale blue eyes

pinebreeze- very pale tan she-cat with gradient tabby stripes and darker ears, light green eyes

finchclaw- black and white she-cat with light copper eyes

petalwind- darker calico she-cat with light amber eyes

honeyfur- golden brown tabby she-cat with a beautiful face and green eyes

apprentices:

duskpaw- light brown she-cat (apprenticed to thistlefoot)

sharppaw- gray tom with green eyes
(apprenticed to spiderfang)

mousepaw- light gray tom
(apprenticed to sunshade)

queens:

snowstep- white she-cat with yellow eyes (mother to yewkit and beechkit)

sandclaw- light yellow she-cat with copper eyes (expecting nightthorn's kits)

elders:

toadpelt- dark brown tom with lighter patches

birdwhisper- light gray tabby she-cat

medicine cat:

aldergaze- dark ginger she-cat with bright green eyes

apprentice- cinderleaf (pretty light gray she-cat with white socks)

_____

windclan-

leader: quailstar- light gray-brown tabby tom with a white belly

deputy: owlsight- dark brown tom with far-seeing amber eyes

warriors (toms)

harewhisker- very light gray tabby tom

ravensnout- gray tom with a black nose

shrewfeather- black tom

warriors (she-cats)

grasslight- pale brown tabby she-cat

fawnclaw- light brown she-cat flecked with white

apprentices:

dustpaw- brown tom (apprenticed to ravensnout)

goldpaw- light yellow she-cat (apprenticed to harewhisker)

queens:

brightstorm- light orange tabby she-cat
(mother to willowkit)

elders:

rubbleclaw- gray tom with lighter patches

medicine cat:

thistleberry- dark gray she-cat with a white belly

apprentice: rosepaw (pale red-brown she-cat with tabby stripes)

_____

riverclan-

leader: swanstar- lithe white she-cat with a black "mask"

deputy: webfur- gray tom with lighter patches

warriors (toms)

hailstrike- gray tabby tom

frogsplash- dark brown tom

warriors (she-cats)

leopardcreek- light golden she-cat with brown flecks

cloudfrost- light gray she-cat with whisps of white

apprentices:

birchpaw- small tabby white she-cat (apprenticed to hailstrike)

graypaw- fluffy gray tom

queens:

brookfern- brown tabby she-cat (expecting frogsplash's kits)

elders:

mossydusk- black and white she-cat

troutfur- black tom

pebbleclaw- light brown tom

medicine cat:

duckwater- fluffy light yellow she-cat

apprentice: appledust (light tortoiseshell she-cat)

_____

shadowclan-

leader: amberstar- light orange tabby she-cat with calm green eyes

deputy: wolfclaw- light gray she-cat with yellow eyes

warriors (toms)

nutstripe- brown tabby tom

rowanstrike- dark ginger tom

warriors (she-cats)

lizardfur- very pale yellow she-cat with black stripes

dapplefoot- tortoiseshell she-cat

apprentices:

slickpaw- lithe tabby tom

featherpaw- brown tom

queens:

deerfeather- very pale tan she-cat with green eyes (expecting wolfclaw's kits)

silverfur- gray she-cat with pale copper eyes (mother to specklekit and brackenkit)

elders:

rattail- dark brown tom with a lighter tail

medicine cat:

sagewater- pale gray she-cat with pretty hazel eyes

author's note

Warning:

blood and death, suicidal thoughts and actions

chapters will range from three t o 500 words

grief

I'm Vipermask.

grief

I live in a Clan you may know to be called ThunderClan.

grief

I'm a warrior in this ThunderClan.

But this most likely isn't the ThunderClan you've heard of.

This is a different ThunderClan.

grief

This is ThunderClan where you can't be yourself. Ever.

grief

ThunderClan where you can only show affection for your mate.

grief

Which actually doesn't sound so bad.

It is.

grief

This is a ThunderClan where you can *never* see your sister because she chose a different path then you.

grief

In fact, I haven't seen her since we were kits becoming apprentices.

grief

My name is Vipermask, and this is my story.

I

I love to sleep. I always have. But it doesn't matter what I like — I'm stuck in the warriors' den anyways.

And, even if I do like to sleep, I always hear Pinebreeze waking up for the dawn patrol. I can tell she's tired when she wakes up- she sighs and usually has to step over at least three other sleeping she-cats just to get out of the den. Every since she was assigned as a permanent, she hasn't been very *quiet* when it comes to waking early.

Nevermind.
I'm sorry.
I'll be blunt— I'm a pessimist.
I'm negative for my own reasons.
Maybe someday I'll say why.
Probably not.
But you never know.

After I hear Pinebreeze exit the den to collect Nightthorn and Sunshade from the toms' den, as they're permanents as well, I blink open my own eyes and stand up.

Should you leave the den? You haven't left in moons, other than to get prey, you anorexic freak. How will everyone else react when they see the murdering traitor leave her den?

I guess I'm about to find out.
Exiting quietly, I shake out my fur and stretch.

Pinebreeze is talking quietly to Blackdust. They look a little worried as they exchange words. Pinebreeze is freaking out, I can tell by her eyes. Something stirs in my mind as I watch him talk to her. Blackdust- what was it I was thinking about him? It's on the top of my tongue, but I decide not to interrupt them.

Pinebreeze— *also a lying piece of fox-dung*— has always been a little

quieter out of me and Cinderleaf.

She kept mostly to herself, and only really talked late at night before we'd go to sleep. *She lied to you.*.
But when we became apprentices, she became a little more opening to me. We would talk about which other apprentices were cute, and about—

A bout everything. But she lied. She never liked you.

I wince. There always seemed to be a voice in my head.
We talked about how much we missed Cinderleaf. Although she was Cinderpaw then. *Pinebreeze is a liar. She hates you.*
About Halfstar and his cruel leadership. *She knows what you did- she knows why you've been stuck in the warriors' den.*
But as warriors, we split apart again. I haven't talked to her much. *You're lying to yourself. You haven't talked to her at all. Not since the trial.*

But I really can't.
My life is complicated enough. Our Clan has a bunch of stupid rules.
Toms and she-cats do not share the same nests, even if they're mates. In fact, toms have different dens. Theirs is reinforced with brambles, whereas ours is only weaved in with ferns.
We can't really have friends. At all. The only allowance for affection is with your mate. Actually you basically have one chance to get a mate. Once Halfstar announces it formally, that's it.

Actually, this doesn't sound so bad, does it? Well, put yourself in my paws. Say you found this pretty she-cat and want to be with her forever. Then she leaves you for a different tom because she's unhappy.
Well, she'd have to be unhappy forever, because once you're seen talking to a tom more and more, it's announced. That's it. Forced. You can only have kits during greenleaf. And if the spot's open, one of your she-kits is forced to be a medicine cat.

We don't have tom medicine cats. It's forbidden. Our medicine cats are isolated from everybody because they don't want any romance or friendship blossoming. If there is a forbidden love across borders

or even a medicine cat relationship, one cat is cast out and the other is killed so they don't stay together.

Everything is so forbidden, isn't it..
But it's what we have to live with. It's either stay here or die. That's what we're told, anyway.

Pinebreeze breaks away from talking to Blackdust and walks into the toms' den to get Sunshade and Blackthorn.
She collects them and leaves after getting Mousepaw, Sunshade's apprentice.

Oh, yeah. Only toms are allowed to mentor. So, that's kinda unfair.
You always wanted an apprentice.
Anywho, I decide to be productive today and enter Halfstar's den, where he's talking to Maplecreek. *This is wrong. You're a kit just leaving the nursery.*

"Excuse me, Halfstar."
"Yes, Vipermask?" He's not shocked. I expected him to be. I haven't been out in moons. Many, many moons.
My insides scream to get away from him. *He's a murderer!* is what my instincts are telling me. But I don't listen. I have to do something.

I haven't been on patrol for a long time. Don't ask why, because I won't tell you. Something came up, and I haven't really been myself lately, is all. *You're lying.*

"Well, what do you want?" he askes impatiently. *Leave.*
"Can I take out a hunting patrol?" *Can I leave this Clan*?
"Yes."
"Thank you, Halfstar."

I exit quickly and wake up a few cats. Honeyfur and Petalwind, to be exact. They're surprised to see me doing something that isn't sleeping.
But they don't complain.
They aren't allowed to.
It's *forbidden.*

We walk out the bramble thicket and head towards a small stream.
Honeyfur tries to lighten the mood.
"Nice morning today, isn't it?" she asks politely.

"Yeah," Petalwind mews.
"I guess," I say, uncertain of what else there is to say.
Honeyfur glances at me pitifully. Her pale eyes look deep into mine.

After a while this gets pretty uncomfortable.
"I'm sorry," she mews quickly. Then she turns around and starts to look for something to hunt.

II

Well, that wasn't weird or anything.

I'm alone with Petalwind now. She looks about as confused as I do. She glances away.
We walk together for a bit, trying not to stray too far from where Honeyfur departed. I scent a mouse and drop to my paws.

"Mouse?" Petalwind whispers.
I nod.
I creep forward, my tail above the ground, my lean shoulders tucked under my stomach. I bunch my legs one I see the mouse, and spring, landing next to it. It scampers away, so I just sigh and return to the spot Petalwind is in.

She's as low to the ground as I was. I can tell by the way she's poised that she's seen a rabbit. Her legs aren't tucked, which lets her chase it if she needs to. Her back legs are bent so she can spring, and she looks ready to pounce.

"I'll flush it out," I whisper to her. *Yeah, right. You aren't good enough to catch a rabbit.*

It's her turn to nod.
I crawl over to a bush and slip into it quietly.
The rabbit doesn't twitch a whisker. It's about three fox-length away.

Petalwind begins to creep forward carefully. I slip out of the bush and step very lightly. Things are looking in our favor.
She springs. A little too early, but I think she's got it. Her claws brush the ground before the rabbit and it takes off. I leap from the undergrowth and chase after it.

I run as fast as my legs will take me. The rabbit turns.
I turn.
The rabbit ducks into a rabbit hole.

I don't.

Instead I turn around and head back towards Petalwind. The slick tortoiseshell looks disappointed.
You're a failure.

"Sorry," she whispers, ducking her head, maybe in shame? *She's scared of you. You're a murderer.*
"It's okay," I mew. "It's mid-greenleaf, they'll be more."

The small, nervous smile returns to her face.
We turn back and look for Honeyfur.
She pops out of a bush with two or three voles.
"I found a nest," she explains.

She sounds nervous, talking to me. I wonder why. *You know why.*
"That's great!" Petalwind exclaims. "It'll feed Snowstep and her kits!"
I nod with her. Honeyfur looks a little embarrassed by our praise.

We return to camp. Honeyfur drops her voles on the fresh-kill pile.
The pile is actually pretty large, consisting of all sorts of prey.

I spot a blackbird and pull it out of the pile.
I freeze.
Pinebreeze is watching me. *She's always watching you. She knows what you've done.*

I can tell because her eyes burn into my back when she looks at me.
I lift my head and she snaps her gaze away. I start eating the blackbird, not caring that my own sister hates me for something I didn't do.

No. I'm not a murderer. *But you are... you killed* her.
Sorry. I'll drop this whole not-spilling-anything thing. It's just—

III

I haven't confided in anybody since the accident.

IV

I hear a quiet voice behind me.

"So.. Do you want to share that?"
Pinebreeze. The backstabbing traitor. She's probably with Blackdust now. They're probably having kits. What a surprise.

I try to shake away the voice in my head.
"Sure," I respond.

We finish the blackbird quickly and she walks away, joining Blackdust again. Her tabby pelt shines in the greenleaf sun.
Okay, something is up here. Honeyfur says, "I'm sorry," for no reason, and your sister, who dislikes you for no reason in particular, other than the fact that you're a murderer, asks to share prey with you.

I need to lay down and take all this in.
Sometimes grief takes its time.
Once I'm in my nest, I let my thoughts take control.

You haven't seen your sister since you were six moons old!
And you continue to live in this rat hole of a Clan.
Your only friend is dead.
You killed her.
And your own sister hates you for it.

Before I know it, I'm asleep, surrounded by thoughts.
When I wake up, Halfstar is gathering cats in the middle of the clearing. Moonlight shines down on the clearing.
Oh no! The Gathering! How long have I been sleeping?
I run outside of the den after I quickly stretch. Halfstar looks at me. His eyes are sharp.

I'm in for it.
But he nods and tells me to join the patrol.

After you took a nap that lasted from the morning to midnight? After

you killed your best friend?
Who cares? I'm going to the Gathering!
I haven't been to one since I was an apprentice with Pinebreeze. *The traitor.*

I stay close to Aldergaze. The medicine cat is one of my friends. Kind of.
She's got knowledge on Cinderleaf. So that's also a reason why I stay close to her.
"Hi," I say to her, trying to get her talking. *She knows what else you did.*

"Hello," she chirps happily. *She's good at hiding things.*
"How are you? I haven't really seen you for a while..." I trail off, knowing she'll get curious. Aldergaze is easy to read.
"Do you want to know how your sister is?" she questions. She isn't looking at me.

"How'd you know..?"
"When I was away from my brother that long, I'd feel the way you do too."
"Oh. I never thought about it that way before," I mew. *You didn't even know she had a brother, you mouse-brain.*

Before I know it, we're at the Gathering.
I see a large gray-brown tom that I recognize as Quailstar, WindClan's leader.
A tiny white she-cat is next to him, and I remember her name to be Swanstar, RiverClan's ruthless leader. I remember hearing how strict she was.

Then Amberstar, ShadowClan's leader.
And finally, Halfstar. He leaps up onto the massive tree, on his own branch.

The two she-cats share a branch and Quailstar has his own branch as well.
I watch as Aldergaze's dark ginger pelt disappears into the crowd of cats.

Not sure where to go, I recognize the friendly face of Grasspaw, a

WindClan cat. I walk towards her and sit down.
I think we talked when I was an apprentice once.
But I can't remember.

She turns around when I sit and exclaims, "Viperpaw!"
"Actually, it's Vipermask." I say half-heartedly. I hate Gatherings.
Why did I agree to come?

"You got your warrior name? Me too! It's Grasslight!"
You're in love with her.
For once, the voice in my head is wrong. I love Ravendusk. *But she is dead, and do you know what? You killed her.*

I shake the thought from my head as we catch up on life in ThunderClan and WindClan. It surprises me that I reveal so much of what happens in ThunderClan to her, and how easy it is. *You love her, you love her.*
This is real friendship. Not what we experience in ThunderClan day after day, unable to show affection, even as friends or siblings. Our queens can hardly show love for their kits.

Grasslight asks me a question.
"What?"
"I said, how's your sister? Pinepaw?"
"Pinebreeze. She's- okay.."
"What happened?" she clearly picked up my hesitance.

I fall silent for a bit, thinking.
Do I tell her?
Or not? Surely she knows.
"Pinebreeze, she really doesn't like me anymore."
"Why not?"
"She thinks it my fault that a cat died."
"What?"
"There was a-"
I stop talking. Memories flood back.

Smoke.
Intense heat.
Screaming.
Your best friend dying.

"There was an accident," I lie quickly. Well, only part of it was a lie.

V

She nods understandingly.

"I get it," she mews quietly. "My brother- he- killed a rogue.."
I look at her. Killing rogues on Clan territory is a law that shouldn't be broken by anyone. I've done it- Halfstar has done it- everyone's done it. It's part of the trial to become a warrior.

"It was horrible. He didn't even give the rogue a chance."
Pinebreeze treats me the same way. Like I murdered someone. It wasn't my fault.

Grasslight stops mid-sentence as Swanstar yowls eerily to start the Gathering.
"Cats of all Clans!" Quailstar's gruff mew rings out in the clearing.

All the Clan cats turn to listen.
"I will begin this Gathering under the full moon truce," Quailstar begins. "WindClan has been doing well this greenleaf. We've named two new warrior apprentices, Goldpaw and Dustpaw."

His voice echoes off trees and rings throughout the entire Gathering. No one says anything.
Quailstar keeps talking.

"Prey is plentiful. We have had no trouble with rogues."
Swanstar interrupts.
"*Is* prey plentiful? Is it *really*?"

Quailstar looks at her, one eyebrow raised. "It is, Swanstar. Why do you ask?"
"Because you've stolen prey from RiverClan!"
"Have we? *Really*?"

"Yes! Not *only* you, but ThunderClan and ShadowClan have also stolen prey!"
Amberstar and Halfstar make matching glares at Swanstar.

"We have done nothing of the sort," Amberstar hisses.
"Neither have ThunderClan," Halfstar spits, standing up. His tail is lashing.

I looked at Grasslight worriedly. Please don't let this turn into a battle. *It will. You know it.*
Swanstar continues to insult the other Clan leaders.

"This is a stupid argument," I whisper to Grasslight.
"I know," Grasslight murmurs. "Swanstar is a proud leader. Clearly some Clan has stolen from her."

"Well, it wasn't ThunderClan!" I meow a little louder than I'd liked. Luckily no one notices.

"It wasn't WindClan, either. Amberstar wouldn't steal from another Clan unless something was seriously wrong."

"You're right. I think Swanstar's a little in over her head on this one. If it becomes a war, she's on her own against three angry Clans."

"For Quailstar's sake, I hope she has a little sense left in that addled mind," Grasslight says as she turns to watch the argument finish.

"My warriors have found fish bones on all three Clans' territories!"

"Maybe they're lying!" Halfstar lashes his tail angrily again.

"My warriors would never lie!" Swanstar snaps.

"Okay, I'm not saying Halfstar is a good leader, but he has a point," I mew very quietly in Grasslight's ear. "They may be lying."

"Quailstar isn't much better," Grasslight mutters, "but yeah, you're right. This is a Willowtail and Redclaw story. Willowtail dragged rabbit bones from SkyClan territory onto WindClan's, and blamed Redclaw for it. Windstar bickered with Skystar for moons about it. Finally, in the end, Redclaw killed Willowtail for her treachery."

"You're right. They didn't need StarClan to guide them for anything. They were smart enough to figure things out for themselves. So are we."

All four Clans abandoned their StarClan religion a long time before Halfstar's leadership. They didn't need dead cats to guide them. Medicine cats are only taught herbs. They aren't taught about omens and prophecies, but I've heard that mentors tell stories of old prophecies to apprentices, but I haven't asked Aldergaze, and I haven't seen Cinderleaf.
Quailstar's loud caterwaul shakes me from my thoughts. He unsheathes his claws on the oak branches.
Amberstar leaps from Swanstar's branch and lands safely on Halfstar's.

"Fine, Swanstar. If you insist that we stole prey from you... this will become more than you can handle."

"I can handle anything!"

"Fine," Quailstar hisses. "Then you'll see exactly what you can handle tomorrow morning."

VI

The only thing that concerns me is that ThunderClan, ShadowClan, and RiverClan didn't report at all, besides Swanstar's angry claims.

VII

I exchange goodbyes with Grasslight and Halfstar leads our patrol home. *You love her.*

The voice in my head has been getting worse.
On the way home, I reunite with Aldergaze and talk to her.
"I can't believe there going to be a war going on," I tell her.

"I know. Over some stupid little argument."

"Sometimes Swanstar gets a little out of hand," I mew, rolling my eyes.

"Don't get me started!" she says, laughing

I go to sleep as soon as my head hits the moss.
I haven't slept like this in a long time.
But worries about this war are coming up in my dreams.
Er— by dreams— I mean flashbacks.

I eventually fall into a deep sleep, although the war is still bothering me.

Fire.
Smoke.
I was running, running fast. Pawsteps behind me told me that Ravendusk was behind me. We kept running. I heard her footsteps stop. I turn around, but she's gone.

I wake up immediately. Another nightmare. I shake it out of my head and try to go back to sleep.

"Pinebreeze? Pinebreeze? Where are you?"

Smoke filled my nose as I coughed out hardly audible words.

"Here!" called a loud voice.

"Ravendusk? Where are you? Please, come back!" I was sobbing now.
"Your kits need you!"
I need you.

I guess I have to spill to you now.
You know too much.
We never did find her body, if you were wondering. It burned in the fire.
I wasn't okay after she died. Everything was wrong. Pinebreeze turned her back on me. I couldn't confide in Cinderleaf.

I fell into a deep downward spiral. I sulked in the den. The loss of my mother was still sitting heavily on my shoulders, and now the light of my life in the rat-hole of ThunderClan was gone. Nothing was left. Before I left on my patrol in the early morning, I hadn't left the den in three moons.
I don't think I would've been affected as much if Ravendusk wasn't the only cat I ever loved. She was my best friend.

That's when the voice in my head showed up.

And...
I remember looking for deathberries in Aldergaze's den.
Day after day.
Search after search.
I knew she hid them from me.
So I went looking for them around ShadowClan territory.
I didn't find them. The bushes were picked dry. *The murderer, committing suicide? How unexpected.*

Aldergaze knew. She knew I would look for them.
So I tried other methods.
I jumped in the lake once. Hoping, praying the current would take me.
It didn't.
Aldergaze found me.

After that, I tried jumping from the tallest tree in the forest.
Aldergaze climbed up after me.
I liked to think Cinderleaf sent her after me, but I have no idea.
I lived off of alone time. I sat in the den day after day, trying to

forget.
It didn't work.

VIII

I'm sorry.
That was too much information for you.

IX

Every day I regret looking for them. There is more to life than sulking.

X

I slept really long that morning.
Or at least, I would've, if Maplecreek didn't assign me to dawn patrol.
Everything is back to normal, traitor.

I get out of my nest and follow her outside. Not that I want to- I have to.
Pinebreeze, Sunshade, and Nightthorn are with Maplecreek. I join them and we head off.

I hang in the back and decide to ask Maplecreek her thoughts on the war that was supposed to be going on soon.
Pretending to be enthusiastic, my usual mask to the Clan, I question her.

"Well, I don't know. I suppose I'm excited to get some battle action, and I really want to prove Webfur that he is *not* the strongest deputy."

I force out a laugh. She laughs with me.
Pinebreeze glances back at me. She has a bit of a rush in her eyes.
She beckons me forward with her tail.
I don't want to, but I walk towards her until we're side by side.

"Vipermask."

"Pinebreeze."

Our exchange is polite but not affectionate. *Liar*.

"I wanted to tell you something."

What? That she's forgiven you for what you've done?

"I'm expecting kits."
That takes me by surprise.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Who's?"

I already know the answer. *The liar is with your lover's brother.*

"Blackdust's"

"That's- actually pretty awesome," I tell her honestly.

"But wait," I pause, realizing something immediately. "How could you?"

"What?"

Blackdust.
Blackdust was Ravendusk's brother.
So many things are running through my head at once.
In all my grief-
I forgot completely about the only cat I cared about other than my sisters. The only other cat I was happy being with, other than Ravendusk.
That cat was Blackdust.
No.
No, no, no.
I forgot completely about him.
How could I do this to myself?
He was one of my closest friends growing up.
After Ravendusk died, we split apart.
And now, he's snatched from me.
But I can only blame myself.

You barely loved him. He was like a brother — nothing more.

Blackdust. Ravendusk. Pinebreeze.
I tell Maplecreek something came up and I can't be on the patrol any longer.
She looks startled, but I don't care.
I run as fast as I can to the camp. Running into the entrance of Aldergaze's den, I stop.

I need a few seconds to rewind.

Ravendusk dies.
The voice in my head appears.
Blackdust and I split apart, if we were ever close in the first place.
Pinebreeze grows closer to him.
I try to find deathberries.
Pinebreeze and him are nearly inseparable.
I keep trying to find deathberries.
Pinebreeze does not come to calm me down. Aldergaze does.
I recover from my grief a bit.
I recover to the point of which I can go on patrols again.
I go to my second Gathering ever.
ThunderClan, WindClan, and ShadowClan declare war on RiverClan.
Pinebreeze gets pregnant.
I take a few seconds to relax a little before entering the den.

XI

I enter the den to see Aldergaze sorting herbs.
You shouldn't be here, she wants to say.
"Are you looking for Cinderleaf?" she asks instead.
"Well, I wasn't planning on it."
Leave, she wants to say.
"She's in the back," she says instead.
"Can I ask you a question?"
No, she wants to say.
"Sure," she says instead.
"How did you know I would look for the deathberries?"
She sighs.
I lean forward, hungry for the answer.
"I didn't."
I blink in surprise.
"Your sister did," she says softly.
"What?"
"She knew."
"How?"
"I don't know."
I'm speechless.
"Go."
I nod. I brush past Aldergaze and walk into the back of the den.

XII

"Cinderleaf?"
A slim gray figure is sitting in back of the room, sorting herbs.
She doesn't reply. I didn't expect her to.
Leave, traitor. She doesn't want you here.

XIII

But she hears me.
She turns around.
I feel like I got slapped in the face.
She's gorgeous.
She's grown so much since I'd last seen her.
But that's not a surprise.
The warrior code says strictly to isolate medicine cats from all other Clan members until their mentor passes and they become full medicine cats.
But the warrior code says nothing about running towards your sister after you haven't seen her for twenty moons.
It does, actually. Now go. Halfstar will get you for this.
We can't exchange words, but she flicks her tail in the sense that means;
"How are you?" and "I've missed you!" and "I'm sorry."
I take a step back.
She does know. *She knows you're a backstabbing liar.*
As kits, Aldergaze would teach Cinderleaf signs. Pinebreeze and I would watch her, and learn as well.
I haven't forgotten.
But Cinderleaf steps forward and gazes into my eyes.
She signs one more thing.
"I love you."
I open my mouth to reply, but a rustling noise sounds from behind me.
"Aldergaze?" I mew quietly, not turning around. *Tsk tsk. I knew this would happen.*
"Not quite," a deep voice replies.
Halfstar.

XIV

I turn around to look at Halfstar.
His eyes are burning with passive-aggressive fury.
I've broken the rules.
I'm not supposed to see her until Aldergaze is dead.
Oh no.
What kind of punishment awaits me now? Am I to miss the next Gathering or to be killed?
"Halfstar.."
"Vipermask."
His voice drips like adder's venom. He talks so slow.
I swallow nervously.
"Would you like to explain what is going on here?"
"I- I was feeling sick and decided to pick up some poppy seeds to sleep it off," I tell him.
I know he doesn't believe me.
"Oh, were you? I guess you should pick some up and leave, then."
He tosses three red berries off the ground and to me.
I stare down at them, my heart heavy.
These aren't poppy seeds.

XV

These are the berries that I searched for after the fire.
These are deathberries.

XVI

I gulp nervously.
"These aren't poppy seeds," I tell him.
"I know," he responds.
"Why-"
"Eat them."
"What?"
"I said to eat them. Do as I say."
I turn around to look at Cinderleaf.
She looks incredibly nervous.
She doesn't say anything.
I flatten my ears and lean my head down.
I lap up a berry.

Goodbye.

XVII

Nothing happens.

XVII

Then my vision blurs.
I drop to the floor, shaking.
My mouth foams, and it feels like my insides are being torched.
I writhe in pain.
I barely see Halfstar leave the den.
I scream as loud as I can, which isn't very loud, hoping someone will come and save me.
I close my eyes to Aldergaze nudging my head and telling me to eat some leaves urgently.

All goes black.